

Delta cases mount in New Zealand

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Since New Zealand entered a “level four” lockdown, the strictest level, on August 18 after the discovery of one case of the Delta variant of COVID-19, testing has identified a total of 148 active cases in the community, as of today. Of those, 137 cases are in Auckland, NZ’s largest city, and 11 in the capital, Wellington.

On Monday, Labour Party Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern extended the lockdown in Auckland until September 1 and the rest of the country until August 28. It could be extended further.

The outbreak shows the extraordinary speed with which the highly infectious variant can spread. Officials believe that the outbreak stems from a single person who returned to New Zealand from Sydney, Australia, on August 7. Auckland’s Crowne Plaza Hotel, one of several hotels serving as managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) facilities for returned travellers, is being treated as a possible source for the outbreak.

The outbreak highlights the danger of using hotels in central locations, rather than properly-equipped facilities outside of the cities.

There will undoubtedly be more cases. The Ministry of Health has identified 421 locations where positive cases visited while infectious, including cafes, nightclubs, schools, universities, churches, retail outlets and the SkyCity Casino. More than 15,700 people have been identified as being potentially exposed to the virus.

Although New Zealand has pursued stricter lockdowns than many other countries and has not experienced mass deaths, the country remains highly vulnerable. The government’s vaccination campaign has only begun to ramp up in recent weeks. Just over 23 percent of the population is fully vaccinated and 59 percent have not had their first dose. At present, only people aged over 40 and those aged 12 to 15 are eligible for vaccination. The 30 to 40 age bracket will become eligible tomorrow and those aged 15 to 30 on

September 1.

The majority of the positive cases are from Auckland’s Samoan community, who are disproportionately poor and more likely to suffer from health conditions such as diabetes, and to live in overcrowded conditions. Pacific Islanders also have lower rates of vaccination.

Significant numbers of essential workers, who are working during the lockdown, are unvaccinated, including in supermarkets, at the ports and in food processing. *Newshub* reported on August 20 that 3,000 hospital workers in Auckland had not received a single dose, despite being designated as high risk and a priority.

About 150 staff at the North Shore Hospital were told to self-isolate, after possible exposure to the virus. However, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation told Radio NZ that some nurses in some areas of Auckland have been called to work to fill staffing shortages, despite being identified as close contacts of positive cases and thus potentially placing hospital workers and patients at risk.

An uncontrolled outbreak would quickly overwhelm the public healthcare system due to decades of underfunding. According to the *New Zealand Herald*, there are just 284 fully staffed ICU beds across public hospitals. Dr Craig Carr, from the Australia New Zealand Intensive Care Society, told the newspaper on August 18 that although more medical equipment had been procured over the past 18 months, “we actually have very few extra staff, and in some instances, we’ve got fewer staff.”

More than 30,000 healthcare workers held a nationwide strike in 2018 and another strike in June 2021 to demand better pay and safe staffing levels. The Labour government, while refusing to address the staffing issue, is relying on the trade unions to enforce austerity, including a pay freeze across the entire public

sector.

On Monday, Ardern told the media that “for now” the government remains committed to an “elimination strategy,” which means using lockdowns to stamp out the virus wherever cases are detected. She rejected the approach of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who is insisting that the population must “live with this virus,” i.e., tolerate its continuing spread. This policy has led to an ever-expanding outbreak, along with hospitalisations and deaths, in New South Wales.

Governments in many parts of the world have adopted the policy of “living with” COVID-19, which means ordering schools to open so that people can return to work and corporations resume making profits, while the virus continues to run rampant, killing hundreds of thousands more people.

New Zealand epidemiologist Michael Baker stated during the panel discussion hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday that he expected New Zealand to “squash” the Delta outbreak “in the next week or two.” He described the UK government’s complete abandonment of restrictions, by contrast, as an “almost barbaric experiment on the British people.”

Baker and other experts stressed that vaccination alone is not enough to stop the pandemic. They outlined the public health measures that are necessary to eliminate the coronavirus nationally, and to eradicate it worldwide.

The Ardern government, however, has begun talking about modifying its elimination approach. Speaking on TVNZ on Sunday, COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins said “At some point we will have to start to be more open in the future... some of the measures that we are using, like lockdowns, like a very, very constrained border, you can’t sustain those forever... we can’t sustain doing level four lockdowns every time there’s a community [outbreak].”

Without going into detail, Hipkins said “different settings at the border” would bring a “different risk profile.” The government has already said it plans to ease isolation requirements for international travellers from some countries next year.

The government is facing pressure from big business, reflected in the corporate media. Right-wing radio host Mike Hosking declared that the lockdown was costing “billions” and declared: “is elimination real? And how long before they put the white flag up on that?”

Columnist Matthew Hooton wrote in the *New Zealand Herald* that almost every country “has accepted that Covid is here to stay,” and basically implied that New Zealand could do the same if the country had more ICU capacity and vaccinations.

Stuff columnist Andrea Vance similarly complained: “The rest of the world is embracing its post-pandemic future while New Zealand enters a March 2020 time warp.” She blamed the lockdown on the government’s slow rollout of the Pfizer vaccine and rundown hospitals.

None of these commentators mentioned the horrific consequences for countries like the UK and the US, whose governments have “embraced” living with the virus, in order to fully resume the extraction of profits from the working class. The reopening of schools and workplaces has produced a resurgence in hospitalisations and deaths, including among children. The working class internationally must oppose these murderous policies.



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